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ARE SOCIETAL PERCEPTIONS OF BUTCH AND FEMININE LESBIANS CHANGING?

This study investigates heterosexual reactions toward butch and feminine lesbian women and demonstrates that sexual prejudice should be investigated within identified subgroups of sexual minorities rather than simply using catch-all terminology

Lesbians as a superordinate category fall in the centre of the warmth vs competence space; which is likely a representation of the extreme variation in attitudes towards lesbian sub-groups. While closeted lesbians are perceived as neither competent nor warm, feminine lesbians are perceived as both competent and warm, and butch lesbians are perceived ambivalently as competent but lacking in warmth

Prejudice toward sexual minorities appears to be firmly ingrained. Prejudice has traditionally been viewed as the application of social stereotypes. However, research suggests that there is differentiation in the prejudices associated with identified sub-groups of lesbian women. This study investigates the association between behaviours towards butch lesbians and feminine lesbians. According to gender inversion theory (Kite & Deaux, 1987), stereotypes held of lesbians have traditionally perceived the group as undifferentiated; lacking feminine qualities; maternal instincts, and displaying typically masculine behaviours. However, more recently Geiger, Harwood and Hummert (2006) have shown that perceivers hold more complex representations of this group. Brambilla, Carnaghi and Ravenna (2011) extended these findings by investigating lesbians as both an overall category and as a number of identified subgroups applying the Stereotype Content Model (SCM) (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick & Xu, 2002).

The SCM predicts that social perception is organised under two dimensions: warmth (co-operative or competitive) and competence (social status and abilities). Within this model, groups may be evaluated positively as warm and competent and are therefore admired, or negatively, as cold and incompetent – eliciting feelings of contempt. Fiske *et al.* (2002) further explained that ambivalent attitudes occur when perceptions of groups are mixed, for example, a business manager (highly competent, but lacking warmth) may be respected yet simultaneously disliked – perhaps evoking feelings of envy. Conversely, ethnic minorities and the elderly are well-regarded socially but disrespected due to perceived lack of competence, and are therefore pitied.

Lesbians as a superordinate category fall in the centre of the warmth vs competence space; which is likely a representation of the extreme variation in attitudes towards lesbian sub-groups. While closeted lesbians are perceived as neither competent nor warm, feminine lesbians are perceived as both competent and warm, and butch lesbians are perceived ambivalently as competent but lacking in warmth (Brambilla, Carnaghi & Ravenna, 2011).

Vaughn, Teeters, Sadler and Cronan (2017) further investigated heterosexual perceptions and subjective behaviours towards homosexuals, using the SCM. Reflecting previous research, lesbians as an overall category were identified as the most competent and least warm of the various groups. However, in sub-categories where lesbians were perceived as high in competence and high in warmth (feminine lesbians) they were admired, and this was associated with active facilitation (eg. helping) and passive facilitation (eg. associating)

behaviours. Although, in contradiction to SCM, when lesbians were perceived high in competence and low in warmth (butch lesbians) they were viewed with contempt, instead of envy, which is usually reserved for groups with this mixed combination. Contempt in turn was associated with active harm (eg. attacking) and passive harm behaviours (eg. demeaning). The study reported here investigated the association between heterosexual reactions (facilitation or harm) toward butch and feminine lesbian women. In addition, it hypothesised that there would be an association between 'harm' and 'butch', in line with the findings of Vaughn *et al.* (2017).

Method

A mixed methods research design was used, investigating the association between two variables: heterosexual reactions, with two levels: active or passive harm and active or passive facilitation, towards lesbians with two levels: butch or feminine. Participants were heterosexual contributors to an online discussion board. The data was collected from two online forums and two article commentaries, one of each referring to feminine and one to butch lesbians. Ethical approval for data collection and content use of the two forums ("Digital Spy", 2019; "The Student Room", 2019) was pre-approved, and further authorisation was gained for the online articles (Meade, 2014; Bindel, 2015) in accordance with the British Psychological Society's ethics guidelines for internet mediated research (Hewson & Buchanan, 2017). The first 32 comments from each article were extracted.

As lesbianism is typically regarded as an undifferentiated group, the entire discussion was extracted, and coded by sentences differentiating between feminine and butch lesbians specifically. The unit of analysis was a self-explanatory piece of text that made clear reference to one of the two groups and could be clearly identified as active/passive facilitation or active/passive harm behaviour by the coding manual. The unit could be a sentence, paragraph or the whole post. The codable units were highlighted as either referring to butch lesbians or feminine lesbians, all LGBT identifying commenters were removed. A deductive (top-down) content analyses was conducted on the data. One hundred and thirty-nine units of analysis were coded: 65 represented the feminine lesbians and 74 represented the butch lesbians. A thematic analysis conducted in accordance with recommended guidelines (Braun & Clarke, 2006) established the narrative accounts.

Lesbian Subcategory	Facilitation	Harm	Total
Feminine Lesbian	40	25	65
Butch Lesbian	44	30	74
Total	**84**	**55**	**139**

TABLE 1. The observed frequencies of active/passive facilitation and active/passive harm shown toward butch and feminine lesbians

Results

The observed frequencies for 'behaviour expressed' (in the two categories of facilitation and harm) toward each lesbian subcategory (feminine and butch) were formed into four potential categories (see Table 1 above).

A Pearson Chi square test was conducted to examine the association between the two categorical variables. A non-significant association between the behaviours and the type of lesbian was found ($X^2(1)$ = .063, p >.05). The percentage of facilitation behaviours shown towards feminine lesbians (see Figure 1, p. 27) was 28.6 % and harm behaviours towards this same group was 18 %, suggesting behaviours demonstrated towards feminine lesbians varied widely. The combination of harm (active and passive) towards butch lesbians, although less common than facilitation still appeared more frequently than the combination of active/passive harm toward feminine lesbians. Similarly, the percentage of harm behaviours towards butch lesbians was 21.6 % and facilitation behaviours was 31.7 % also suggesting wide variation in behaviours shown towards butch lesbians.

Narrative account of forum comments

A further qualitative analysis of the prevalent themes revealed the following key content associated with either butch or feminine lesbians.

Active facilitation and butch lesbians

Active facilitation behaviours were most prevalent towards butch lesbians, with many commenters making associations between their own, and the butch group norms. Attempts to understand, and be tolerant of values were shown, some demonstrating notably protective behaviour. These comments may reflect the majority of modern society's changing attitudes towards homosexuals
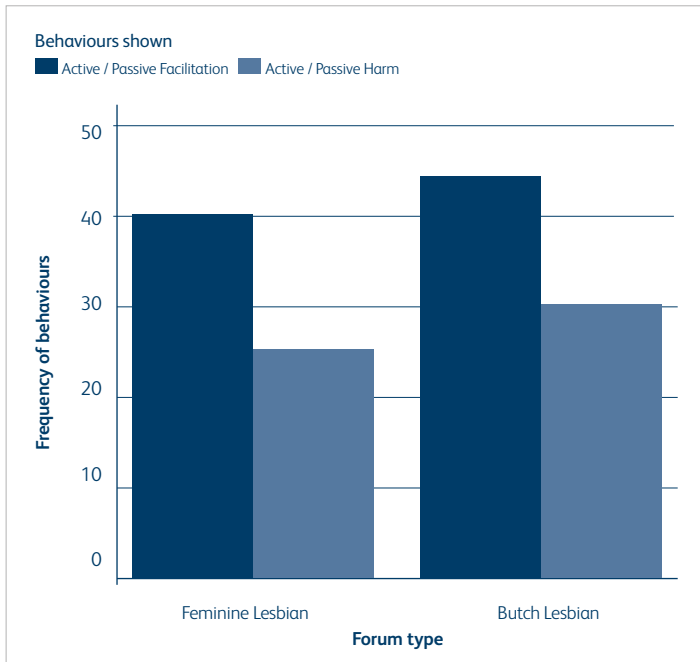
Behaviours shown
■ Active / Passive Facilitation   ■ Active / Passive Harm

FIGURE 1: Displaying the frequencies of behaviours by lesbian subcategory (feminine or butch)

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and gender nonconformity, many people in the forum described being naïve to the preferences of the group, however adopted a live and let live attitude:

You seem to be suggesting if a woman wears pants and has hair cut short, her female partner should just go find a man. That's a rather narrow-minded view of the world. There is more to a person than the clothes they wear and the hair cut they have on their head. Try looking deeper into what rests under that.

Passive harm behaviours and butch lesbians

There was also a prevalence of passive harm behaviours shown towards butch lesbians which commonly took the form of claiming the group's preferences were in some way contradictory. Some commenters may have genuinely been inquisitive of the butch lesbian lifestyle, however, others carried an undertone of disapproval. These comments were typically centred around butch lesbians' appearance and adoption of masculine behaviours, which lead to shallow and discriminatory assumptions:

I've sometimes wondered about this as well. In the case of butch lesbians, they seem to fancy women who look like men which in some ways seems contradictory. Unless they have a penis I'm not sure where the contradiction is.

Butch lesbians – key theme

A less frequent, but key theme in the understanding of sexual prejudice towards butch lesbians were the active harm behaviours shown towards them with commenters saying things such as, *"They are trainee, wannabe men. Stuffing socks down the front of their ill-fitting trousers – what a joke."* The strongest and most discriminative attitudes seemed to reflect the violation of gender norms over the group's sexual preference, for those who still feel strongly that a woman should conform to the 'pretty' warm and competent stereotype, the masculine appearance and perceived aggression of this group was a problem. This can be seen in comments such as, *"Many fight like men on nights out too! Working at gay night, it was like the roles were reversed!"* Notably in this sample, all active harm behaviours reprimanding the group for stereotypical male tendencies came from males themselves, this opens the question as to whether only males in this sample perceived this group as a threat and became competitive, which in turn elicited active harm and passive facilitation behaviours.

Active facilitation and feminine lesbians

For feminine lesbians the facilitatory behaviours were active. Commenters regarded them well for personal appearance and the apparent less-contradictory preferences of sexual partner. These commenters were typically heterosexual females whom solely based the idea of lesbianism on aesthetical features, for these participants this notion was easier to comprehend. Positive attitudes may have been further encouraged by the feminine-lesbian group norms being more similar to their own in terms of gender:

I have a friend (lesbian) and she is a very femme, super hot chick. she digs only those really girlish hottiest girls instead of butch girls... well to me that seems more lesbian – I mean comparing with those girls dressed like guy and behave in a man way...

Active harm and feminine lesbians

However, in direct contrast to the former, being a feminine lesbian and displaying the associated characteristics also elicited more active harm behaviours from the participants. For these commenters there was a sense of discomfort where the violation of social role (sexual preference) combined with the female gendered norm may have been frustrating for perceivers; as they were unable to successfully ascribe a stereotype, perhaps this led to feelings of contempt, which in turn elicited more active harm behaviours for this group. Notably, advocates of this attitude were typically female, in striking similarity to the males' active harm behaviour towards butch lesbians, attitudes may have been mediated more by the perceived competition from this group:

I thought lipstick lesbians aren't actually lesbians, but straight girls who fondle each other in public in order to attract and arouse straight men. Am I wrong?

Feminine lesbians – key theme

Objectification is a key theme in the understanding of sexual prejudice toward the feminine lesbian group, with many assuming that their sexual behaviours were substantially for the enjoyment of others. This is likely a product of the pornography industry. Comments relating to this theme devalue and demean women but have become normalised and widely held attitudes. These participants may not even be aware of the damaging perspectives they hold. Feminine lesbians may have been grouped as 'socially undesirable' for this reason, and in turn be met with discriminatory attitudes and behaviours:

I love winding the despots up at work about LGBT teachers and school staff, as quite a few of them think it is "absolutely DISGUSTING"...but the 'men' get excited about them anyway. So they can take their clothes off for your pleasure, but not teach your kids, apparently

Discussion

This study investigated the association between behaviours (active and passive harm, or active and passive facilitation) towards lesbians (butch and feminine), and found that there was no association between these two variables. The results of this study contradict the findings of Vaughn *et al.* (2017) in which there was a significant association between harm behaviours and butch lesbians, in contrast, this study found a prevailing theme of active facilitation and passive harm behaviours shown towards butch lesbians. This study's results have important implications for research on lesbian stereotypes. It may be that society's perception of this group has changed and it is now associated with higher degree of warmth.

The findings of this study further contradict Vaughn *et al.* (2017) in which there was a significant association between facilitation behaviours (both active and passive) and feminine lesbians. A content analysis of the data revealed a prevailing theme of active facilitation and active harm behaviours shown towards feminine lesbians. As the behaviours demonstrated towards feminine lesbians were predominantly active, we might speculate that the emotions and behaviours towards this group were mediated singularly by the warmth dimension and not the competence of the SCM model.

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The authors would like to note that the images shown in this article were retrieved from a generic database and are therefore likely to reflect societal stereotypes rather than the views of the authors themselves.

The feminine lesbian may be more difficult to apply to the model. As an in-between group there is no definitive gender stereotype to anchor them too. Butch lesbians have traditionally been associated with masculine behaviours (Kite & Deaux, 1987) and have further replicated the male dimension of the SCM model whereas feminine lesbians have previously grouped into the high warmth, high competence quadrant of the SCM (usually reserved for friends and in-groups) (Brambilla, Carnaghi & Ravenna, 2011). Consequently, this may cause conflicting perspectives.

Importantly this study demonstrates, in line with previous research, that sexual prejudice should be investigated within identified subgroups of sexual minorities (Geiger, Harwood & Hummert, 2006). Despite the lack of quantitative support for the hypothesis that there would be an association between the expressed behaviour of harm, and the lesbian subcategory of 'butch', the qualitative findings of this study do provide evidence of the differing and widely held attitudes towards sub-groups of homosexuals. Currently, there is minimal research on sexual prejudice towards lesbians in relation to stereotypes available (Lee & Crawford, 2012), therefore, this study has made an important contribution to the literature.

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